



North East Community Mental Health Resilience through football project: Pilot Project Evaluation Report

December 2016

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Prepared by the North of England Mental Health Development Unit (NEMHDU)

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1. BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The mental health of the North East public is of increasing concern as published statistics indicate that the North East has higher levels of depression than the England average, higher levels of hospital admissions than the England average for unintentional and deliberate injury in the 0-24 age group and overall similar or worse wellbeing scores than the England average for happiness, satisfaction, feeling worthwhile and anxiety.

Rates of suicide in the North East are the highest in the Country and nationally the male suicide rate is at its highest since 2001. Middle aged men are disproportionately impacted by suicide and rates amongst 45-59 year olds are their highest since 1981. The majority of individuals who take their own lives are not in contact with formal services at the time of death, therefore suicide prevention approaches need to consider community based approaches as well as those through services. Over 70% of all suicide cases occur amongst individuals who have are not in contact with mental health services, therefore alternative ways to deliver suicide prevention through a community approach is essential to addressing this important issue.

The wider determinants of health which have a specific impact on mental health and suicide include unemployment, long term health problems and disability and social isolation. The impact of redundancy and job loss has an adverse impact on mental and physical health for the individual, their family and wider community. For the individual this includes poor mental health, depression, anxiety but also physical health such as increasing cardiovascular risk, associated lifestyle changes and the impact of stress.

It is important to note that there is an example of good practice in the North West where there is currently a successful male mental health programme running across rugby league clubs called 'State of Mind' (<http://www.stateofmindsport.org/>) which inspired an approach through sport and is providing mentorship for the development of this programme.

1.1 Engagement of the North East region

Following the North of England Mental health Development unit (NEMH DU) 2015 Autumn Conference on Suicide Prevention, Local Authority Public Health, Public Health England PHE and the Strategic Clinical Network developed a partnership with the voluntary organisation "If you care share" and the major football foundations across the North East to develop a new programme of suicide prevention work aimed at promoting mental resilience and wellbeing primarily amongst males.

1.2 The Project Summary

The project aims to use *football fan culture* as a medium through which to encourage men to talk about their problems and develop improved mental health and greater emotional resilience, thus preventing further ill-health and reducing the risk of suicide. To include:

- The development of local community “boot rooms” providing a venue and space for men to meet socially and provide mutual support
- An information campaign to raise awareness and recognition of distress, reduce mental health stigma, promote behavioural change in seeking help

This project aims to initially work with the three large football clubs in the North East: Middlesbrough, Sunderland and Newcastle in order to target their male football fans. It is expected that the vast majority of these men will reside in the North East Region. As the project develops further it is anticipated that other North East football clubs will also participate, and will therefore influence and engage men from across the North East region.

1.3 Objectives

- To engage men about their mental health through football sporting activity and popular culture.
- To raise awareness of the importance of good mental health amongst men, their families and communities.
- To facilitate greater self-awareness of one's own mental health and emotional resilience
- To enable men to be able to recognise emotional distress in others e.g. their friends and families
- To promote the social acceptability of talking about emotional problems.
- To change/ challenge male attitudes towards personal mental health.
- To promote the social acceptability of help seeking and awareness of local services

1.4 The pilot project

The pilot project in the Middlesbrough and Redcar/Cleveland areas has focused upon targeting men who have been impacted by the recent closure of SSI Steelworks and experiencing the loss of their employment and thus it was shaped within that context.

This model looked at engaging local champions in communities that would assist with tackling social isolation and loneliness by supporting individuals to maintain latent functions such as time structure during the day, continued shared experiences with others, goal setting and continuing to be active. It aims to build community resilience using evidence based mental health improvement interventions.

It is hoped that if successful the model will be adaptable for implementation across other areas and the range of football clubs in the North East.

The aim of pilot evaluation was to explore the lived experience of men attending the Redcar/Cleveland Boot Room, in order to obtain their views and perspectives on the benefits, improvements, further development and evaluation of ‘boot rooms’ as a community-based intervention to improve mental health resilience.

1.5 The background and strategic objectives of the NEMHDU

NEMHDU is a not-for-profit social enterprise based in the North of England. NEMHDU's mission is to improve the mental health and social wellbeing of local communities by:

- Working alongside statutory and independent organisations to develop their strategic objectives, increase their efficiency and capacity and deliver recovery-focused outcomes.
- Working alongside service users and carers to ensure that they are able to play an active role in their own care, as well as the wider development and evaluation of health and social care services.

2. EVALUATION METHODS

2.1 Literature Review

A literature search undertaken by Public Health England (PHE) to identify evidence of reaching men of middle age who are not currently in contact with services, in particular evidence on how to relay messages about emotional health and wellbeing and prompt help seeking behaviour in this group.

PHE developed and ran a structured search strategy (Appendix 1) in four electronic databases (MedLine, Embase, CINAHL, PsycINFO) supplemented with Internet searches (Netvibes and Google) in order to answer the following review question:

What is the evidence for using sport as a vehicle for reaching audiences not in touch with services with health improvement messages and behaviour change?

The results of the structured search were restricted to English language papers published between 2005 and 2015.

The findings of the literature search and subsequent narrative review are presented in Chapter 3.

2.2 Interactive Group Discussion

A key informant (Boot Room Lead, Brian) was consulted to discuss the optimal strategy for engaging with men attending the Redcar and Cleveland Boot Room. The key informant advised against a quantitative approach (e.g. use of structured questionnaires), due to high-risk of negative reaction from members.

Therefore, qualitative methods were used to investigate the lived experience of Redcar and Cleveland Boot Room members. In collaboration with the key informant a data collection strategy was formulated that consisted of non-participant observation, whereby the researchers attended a boot room meeting to establish a rapport with members to gain a sense of the context.

During the visit the researchers took field notes, which were discussed after the meeting to inform a guide (Appendix 2) for interactive group discussion to elicit the attendees' views and perspectives on the following:

- Their experiences of attending/engaging in the boot rooms, including what worked well and not so well
- Their views and perspectives on the value of the future programme Overview of aims / objectives including target funding source and amount (BLF ~£250K), including

strategies for engagement and why football is useful vehicle for engaging the target population

- Development of a plan for co-production/design/delivery of activities (including ways of working peer support etc), engagement process (social marketing, recruitment) and sustainability beyond funding period (e.g., transitioning to an 'expert' peer support role)
- Their views on how to evaluate the programme, including specific tools and techniques that would be 'acceptable'

The discussion, with permission of the group was audio-recorded and transcribed to facilitate data analysis. Data collected from the boot room was supplemented with emails from previous boot room members that were sent to the key informant.

A narrative approach was used to generate a coherent account of the findings in accordance with the aims of the pilot evaluation. Direct quotes from boot room members are presented to add credibility to the themes, along with pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Member checking (or respondent validation) was used to increase the likelihood that themes within the narrative account accorded with the views and experiences of the boot room members. A provisional draft of the findings of the boot room interactive discussion was sent to the group (via the key informant) to obtain their feedback on the content of the narrative discussion, which informed the final draft.

The themes identified from interactive group discussion are presented in Chapter 4.

3. FINDINGS: LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Results of electronic literature search

A total of 45 articles were identified from the literature search undertaken by PHE (Table 1)

Table 1. Summary of resources searched and results

| Source | Results |
|-----------------|--------------------------|
| MEDLINE | 10 |
| EMBASE | 7 |
| CINAHL | 18 |
| PSYCINFO | 0 |
| OTHER (SPECIFY) | Netvibes – 2, Google - 8 |

Titles and abstract of the 45 articles identified by the literature search were screened for relevance to the aims of this evaluation project and the larger planned programme. Out of the 45 articles, 9 primary research articles reporting on the use of football as a vehicle to improve health and well-being of adult men in community settings with direct involvement of football clubs were retained, and subsequently organised into a narrative synthesis. These primary studies are summarised in section 3.2

3.2 Primary research using football as a vehicle for improving the health and well-being of adult men in community settings with direct involvement of football clubs

| Study | Participants | Summary of methods (and intervention) | Key findings | Key recommendations for design of programmes |
|-------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| Brady et al 2010 ⁱ | N = 40 Sedentary men aged 40–60 recruited from season ticket holder database (Rangers and Celtic) | 10 week programme (2 hours per session) targeting obesity, exercise and diet Initial hour consisted of a health discussion on range of topics such as cardiovascular health and health behaviours (alcohol) and stress management. The second hour rotated between 20 min pitch side exercise; 20 min cardiovascular workout | Mean body weight fell by 2.73 kg (4% reduction, $P < 0.001$, 95% CI 1.54–3.92). Cholesterol fell by 0.49 mmol/L (95% CI –0.18 to –0.8, $P = 0.01$) over the 15 months. At the start of the programme only six men could jog a distance of ~350m. After 10 weeks', all the men easily managed the 350m distance | hosting the health programmes at the major football clubs was the key to success The authors asserted that the men as an avid football supporters was effectively channelled into motivation to engage in the programme |

| | | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|--|--|--|
| | | <p>(treadmills and other aerobic equipment), and 20 min dietary advice and discussion.</p> <p>The exercise programme was designed for each individual participant (safe zone of 60–80% of maximum predicted heart rate) run by coaching staff at Rangers and Celtic</p> <p>Dietary adjustments were based on adoption of a Mediterranean-style diet</p> | | |
| Gray et al 2013a ⁱⁱ | Programme targeted men aged 35-65 years with body mass index > 27 kg/m | Paper describes the development and optimization of the Football Fans in Training (FFIT) programme. | <p>The FFIT programme comprised of 12, weekly, gender-sensitised, group-based weight management classroom and 'pitch-side' physical activity sessions (11 Scottish Premier League Football clubs).</p> <p>Outside the stadiums, the FITT also included a pedometer-based walking programme.</p> | FFIT programme was deemed to be acceptable to men and was subjected to a pilot trial (see next study – Gray et al 2013b) and pragmatic trial (see Hunt et al 2014) |
| Gray et al 2013b ⁱⁱⁱ | <p>N = 113 men aged 35-65, body mass index >27</p> <p>n=51, received version of FFIT) and waitlist comparison</p> <p>n=52, received FFIT after four months</p> | Explored the feasibility of using Football clubs (2 from the Scottish Premier League, one large and one small) as a setting for a randomized controlled trial of the FFIT programme | <p>Recruitment target was achieved at the large, but not smaller, club</p> <p>Retention >75% at 12 mths 76% attended at least 80% of available programme delivery sessions.</p> <p>At 12 weeks, the intervention group lost significantly more weight than the comparison group. There were also improvements in self-reported physical activity and diet</p> | A trial of FFIT is warranted (see Hunt et al 2014a and b) |
| Hunt et al 2013 ^{iv} | N = 29 men aged 35-65, body mass index taking part in FITT | Semi-structured telephone interviews | All men were positive about the broader intervention, which encouraged them to increase their physical | Many men experienced the walking program as a means of regaining |

| | | | | |
|------------------------------------|---|--|---|---|
| | programme (see Grey et al 2013a and b) | | <p>activity (and adopt other behavioural changes).</p> <p>The success and acceptability of the walking program resided in three interrelated factors: utility of pedometers; regain visceral, experiential, and pragmatic masculine capital); and bolstering their masculine identities</p> | <p>fitness, valued masculine identities and activities, and regaining a more acceptable masculine body.</p> |
| Pringle et al 2013 ^v | N = 1,159 men aged 18-44 years with heightened health risks, and hard-to-engage men who were not using primary care and health information services | Health promotion interventions were delivered on match days and weekly lifestyle classes at the football stadia/training venues. Activities were led by health trainers in 16 English Premier League football clubs. | The interventions demonstrated significant increases in weekly physical activity and daily consumption of fruit and vegetables, including decreases in daily sitting, weekly alcohol consumption and BMI | Interventions delivered in this setting engaged men who neither consulted a GP nor used health information services. |
| Zwolinsky et al 2013 ^{vi} | N = 130 men aged ≥ 18 | 12-week behavioural intervention delivered by English Premier League football/soccer clubs focused on physical activity, diet, smoking and alcohol consumption | At 12 weeks, 19% (n = 24) of men displayed positive change in one behaviour and 67% (n = 87) had changed >2. | The setting of this behavioural intervention can reach and engage a proportion of at risk men |
| Bingham et al 2014 ^{vii} | N = 7 men aged 47-63 years | Ethnographic study of 'Fit Fans' a weekly programme (focused on physical activity, diet and well-being) delivered over an eight-month period within an English Premier League Football Club | <p>The men reported a range of physiological health needs (none of the physiological markers improved; (i.e. men remained obese after the programme) and chronic health problems.</p> <p>Current guidelines were viewed as 'out of reach' for populations most 'at risk'. Reflecting on this the practitioner adopted an approach, which allowed men to adapt and agree achievable personal goals, which improved success in achieving them</p> <p>Men reported wider benefits of Fit Fans in terms</p> | Engagement with men in this setting requires practitioners to understand the negative effect health complications on health behaviour change. Practitioners need the skills and ability to personalise their approach and engage men in a positive and evolutionary relationship of trust |

| | | | of social and psychological benefits | |
|----------------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| Hunt et al 2014a ^{viii} | N = 63 men aged 35-65 years with BMI>28 | 13 focus group discussions with men who had enrolled in the trial of FFIT – see Hunt et al 2014n Focus groups explored who is attracted to FFIT and why they men choose to participate | Overall over 90% of men were at very high or extremely high risk of ill-health Mean body mass index was 35.3 Approximately 75% in all age groups were at very high risk of type 2 diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease (72%, 73% and 80% of men aged 35-44, 45-54 and 55-64 years respectively). A further 21%, 16% and 13% were at extremely high risk of the conditions | FFIT enabled men to engage in a weight management programme in circumstances that felt 'right' - that is consistent with, rather than challenging to, common ideals of masculinity |
| Hunt et al 2014b ^{ix} | 747 male football fans aged 35-65 years with a body-mass index (BMI) of ≥ 28 kg/m(2) from 13 Scottish professional football clubs 374 allocated to the intervention group and 374 to the comparison group | Two-group pragmatic, randomised controlled trial of FFIT | At 12 months, men in the intervention group (FFIT) reported more weight loss than those in the comparison group. Eight serious adverse events occurred, with 2 of these 8 related to participation in the programme (gallbladder removal and ruptured Achilles tendon). | The FFIT programme can yield clinically important weight loss in men |

3.3 Summary and conclusions

Football related health improvement is an emergent field of study where practitioners and academics are beginning to recognise the potential that football has to engage with the UK general population for the purposes of delivering health promotion interventions (Rosenbaum et al 2015^x; Parnell et al 2015^{xi}). As a global brand, the English Premier League alone reaches 4.7 billion people with media broadcasts stretching across 212 national territories (Cashmore and Dixon 2016^{xii});). Moreover, regional teams in the UK are entrenched within local communities and contribute significantly to the identity of local people. As Dixon (2016^{xiii}) explains, football influences or impacts most agents at some life intersection (i.e. whether they are fans of football or not) and in turn, it is a potentially powerful medium for practitioners to use in order to reach target populations.

This review has found a small evidence-base for the use of football as a vehicle for delivering health promotion interventions to men in community settings; in particular where intervention activity is delivery through, and involves direct involvement with professional football clubs.

The nine studies identified from this narrative review found evidence that health promotion interventions in these settings were acceptable and feasible for:

1. engaging hard to reach populations of men (neither consulted a GP nor used health information services)
2. engaging men at high-risk of premature mortality due to chronic health conditions
3. increasing physical activity and fitness and improving dietary behaviour, including reducing alcohol consumption
4. yielding improvements in markers of cardiovascular health and clinically significant reductions in weight
5. providing a gender-specific means of improving health, regaining valued masculine identities and activities.

These five areas are important for mental health and well-being. Although only one study (Bingham et al 2014) identified by the review alluded to the wider social and psychological benefits of men engaging in the Fit Fans programme, along with the need for skilled facilitators that can focus on personalisation of intervention activity to the context of men's lives. However, at present there is a paucity of research into the potential of football themed initiatives for improving mental health (Curran et al 2016^{xiv}).

Bottorff et al (2015^{xv}) conducted a systematic review of interventions targeting physical activity in adult men. These authors discuss the value of explicitly focussing on men's interests and preferences, including masculine ideals and male gender influences. FFIT is the only comprehensively co-developed and rigorously evaluated football-themed health promotion intervention targeting men with evidence of effectiveness for weight loss. The FFIT programme reflected masculine ideals and included football club-based incentives (e.g. visits from club celebrities) with a focus on "banter" in discussions of sensitive health issues.

Evaluative research into football-related health improvements is in its infancy, with a current primary focus on physical health in the peer-reviewed literature, i.e. using football initiatives to target weight loss or to improve cardiovascular health.

The inauguration of the Mental Health Charter for Sport and Recreation in 2015 (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2015^{xvi}) provides an impetus to build on the work described in this review. The charter was endorsed by the Football Association and other sporting bodies, with the aim of tackling mental health stigma and prejudice.

Football as a male gender-sensitive context has substantial promise to engage adult males in community-based health promotion interventions that yield improvements in physical and mental health. Further work is warranted to establish the contextual factors that underpin

successful engagement of men in such programmes, and to identify both the gender and non-gender sensitive active ingredients of interventions that drive sustained participation over time.

4. FINDINGS: INTERACTIVE GROUP DISCUSSION

Two researchers facilitated a group discussion with twelve members of the Redcar/Cleveland Boot Room (hereafter referred to as 'members').

4.1 Football as a vehicle for engagement

The majority of the members agreed they would describe themselves as football fans, and there was evidence that football was an important driver of involvement and continued engagement in the Boot Room,

"Football brings a common bond and is a common language for men generally...The football structure works because it's comfortable, we have access to the field and the indoor facilities, so it works well in many respects".

However, football was not the only driver of involvement in the Boot Room. In one member attendance appeared to have nurtured an interest in football:

"I'm a speedway supporter. I didn't follow football, but I'm going to my first match because of this group, which is fantastic. Crystal Palace v Middlesbrough. I don't know anything about football so this is a new experience for me."

Other members commented on the attraction of the Boot Room being set up to support ex-steel workers as a way of preserving their social identity:

"Well I do like football, but that's not what brought me here. I saw my mate out with his shorts on (laughs). He's just been playing football here and I asked him what he'd been doing and he said 'we got this group set up for ex steel workers' and he told me a bit about what goes on and said 'why don't you come along next week'."

Another member commented:

"It's not really football that brings us together. It's that we're ex steel workers and we are all (largely speaking) in the same situation. It's not a situation that we'd choose but here we are."

Another member added:

"There is a common bond and I think football brings a common bond as well. Sort of all my life I've played football... it's in our make-up".

These quotes reflect the importance of a social identity, which alongside a shared adverse circumstance, and the common language of football served as a powerful facilitator of involvement in, and continued engagement with the boot room.

Figure 1: The Project Launch Held at Middlesbrough Football Club Supported by Senior MFC Foundation staff and current Middlesbrough player George Friend



4.2 The value of the boot room from the perspective of the members

Having experienced life-changing circumstances associated with mass redundancy, the members found much value in the Redcar Boot Room project. The temptation to isolate themselves post-redundancy was a common experience for the members; in this regard, the Boot Room project was considered a timely intervention.

“When work stops it’s easy to stop engaging with the world in the way you used to. So, I’ve been looking after my granddaughter a lot but adult conversation is lacking and you find yourself existing, not living. So for me it’s been great to get out again and I enjoyed it so much that I invited my mate down”.

Members’ spoke enthusiastically about the project as a means to avoid their lives ‘spiralling out of control’ through isolation and depression. Consequently, one value added benefit, reiterated by members, was that the Boot Room provides a platform to **boost confidence** and **self-esteem** by offering hope for the future via peer support and guidance:

“Put it this way, when your job is the only thing you’ve known and it’s taken away, it’s a head spinner. Yeah, when you’re stuck in four walls you think that it has only happened to you. You’re in your own little world. You think you’re excluded but you’re not. So it’s the eureka moment when you come down here and realise that you’re not excluded and you have likeminded people to chat to. What happens is that they pull each-other out of the stupor they’re in. You are being counselled and you are the councillor at the same time (laughs)”.

The members spoke about 'taking strength from one another', because they are all 'in the same boat'. Commonality between the group members was a valued feature because 'all the guys 'get' one another'. Being able to empathise, to have shared experience, helped the members to accept advice from, and provide support to one another. The members did not always refer to **mental health** explicitly, but it was often implicit with the topic of conversation:

*"People do get in a mind-set where they give up, basically. They sit and do as little as possible. When you're dealing with someone's mind set, nothing is straight forward. You might not have a bandage on but you feel like sh**e and you withdraw from everyone. But whereas here, once you get to know a few people as well, you get people socialising again rather than becoming insular".*

At a more sobering level, one member said:

"You asked what I'd be doing if this group wasn't here. Honest answer. I could be dead!"

Members also acknowledged the value of the Boot Room for **extended families**. Members explained that relationships with family members 'can be strained' as well-establish routines are broken and new routines begin:

"When you're doing twelve hour shifts, you're spending more time with your work mates than with your family. People forget that... All of a sudden you're doing the things that they'd (family) be doing. The ironing, the hanging the washing out. It's difficult for your partner to readjust, same as it is for us. Your just there in the same space!"

"She (wife) knows that I'm here every Thursday and she thinks it's great because it gives me something to do. I know that without something to do I am a nightmare. As soon as I get out of that house I know it's a party [laughs]"

The members also cited **physical** as well as **mental health** benefits associated with the Boot Room. The members would play football and try other physical activities as a group:

"We do plenty of walking and we're trying to get something organised for later this year, we can play football here, and we're trying to get something organised indoor for the winter months and we've been lawn bowling as well. We do all sorts of stuff like this. It's all good fun".

The members were aware that physical health could suffer as depression closes in. One participant said:

"But before this started up, you're in a rut after someone tells you that you've no work anymore. You get into little habits. Stay up all night, drink more than you should or one thing or another... It's easy to put weight on. This gives you something else to be doing, something useful. That's what I find".

As indicated in figure 2 (below), activities associated with the Boot Room provided a range of opportunities for the members to engage in physical activity and receive health check-ups. For example, at the request of the members the Middlesbrough Football Club health bus visited the Boot Room.

It is important to note that all of those valued functions (described above) are underpinned by **enjoyment**: Notably - *'the craic between friends', 'getting out the house', 'being active' (mind and body) 'meeting new people', 'finding out information', 'fun', and providing a forum to 'discuss problems'.*

Figure 2: (a) Team Talk Redcar Boot Room Exercising (b) Volunteering at a Job Fair



4.3 What has worked well / not so well?

What worked well?

The philosophy of this initiative is based on the legendary Liverpool FC Boot Room culture that was established in the 1960's. Project lead, Brian explains:

"It's from Bill Shankly (Ex Liverpool FC football manager). It's an extremely informal room where he used to make his plans... Everyone is encouraged to speak freely and honestly without fear. It's all confidential...But it really is about informality, that's what the boot-room is all about – that's the concept behind it".

Empowerment is at the heart of the Boot Room and members described how this functioned in practice. The members communicated that this project is more than an initiative that offers emotional support. Members explained that it is practical and proactive; aiming to help them to fulfil both group- and individual level-goals. Perhaps the most important feature described by members was that they drove the agenda and activities. One participant commented:

"Well, like Brian (project lead) said from the outset, 'I'm not here to dictate to you what you're going to do'. He said, 'you guys can tell me what you want to do and then, if we can, we'll facilitate it'"

Another member explained:

"So, for example even when some of the lads might say, 'Brian (project lead) can you get someone in to talk to us about pension advice'? Brian will say 'no problem' and he'll get them in. What he won't do is make us all listen to the advice. The guy or woman that comes in will only give advice to those that have asked for it. The others will be doing other stuff that they feel is relevant to them. That's how it works and that's why it is successful. Flexibility and informal. That's its success".

The advice offered by the Boot Room was also directed toward development of life skills:

"We were asked to write down on a piece of paper what we wanted to do and one lad wrote that he'd like to learn the basics of how to cook. For thirty years when he came in from work his tea was ready for him. Now, when he's on his own, he hasn't got a clue. He wanted to cook some tea for his wife when she got in from work...So they got in touch with a contact from the council and got him on a course".

Members were keen to explain that requesting speakers (from various organisations) to deliver presentations and interactive workshops worked well. It offered a platform (that participant's might not otherwise have access) to speak with those in official roles **on their own terms**. They believe that this model works for outside organisations as well as for the Boot Room members:

"...the girl from the career service really enjoyed coming to speak with us. The honesty was an eye opener for her. She fed all of our concerns, ideas and suggestions back to her team. So, we are open to anyone (relevant organisation) but when you come through those doors this is our gaff and we lead discussions on our terms".

Some of the initial members of the Boot Rooms have now found employment, taken on roles as volunteers, or enrolled on education or vocational courses. Members attributed these 'success stories' to the proactive exchange of information that occurs between the men at the Boot Rooms and the added advice or information that comes from organised speakers and other activities:

"We've had the careers people down. They advised on how to go self-employed and that's been good for a couple of the lads. We've also had a lad down from McMillan College to give instruction on IT. So it's been a good focal point for exchanging information".

Being proactively involved and taking control of one's destiny was identified a key feature that is working well for those involved in this initiative.

What worked not so well?

One recurring issue cited by members was a concern over the financial sustainability of the Boot Room. Participants largely agreed that sustainability was crucial but this was out of their control. One participant said:

"I don't know how much it costs to keep this going or who's in charge of the money. All we can do, I suppose is say to those with money just how valuable this project is, but it is for others to decide on its future. The fact that that you're here with us today shows that people think it's a good idea, so hopefully this will lead to a sustainable project for others to benefit from".

Whilst not raising any further criticisms directly, members spoke about resources that they would like more access to, if possible. First, they referred to the restricted time that they have per-week at the project. One participant said:

"I come here once a week on a Thursday and I think we are supposed to be here 10am-12pm, but you'll find that lots of us stay for longer... If we could meet more often, well I'd come down definitely".

It is important to note that there is no obligation to attend the Boot Room on a weekly basis, which suited members that were enrolled on training courses, engaged with temporary short-term employment, education or full time work contracts. Even so, for those that are able to attend, the members would appear to welcome extended hours in a more formal sense.

As a second feature, members said that they would like to have more guest speakers at the Boot Room to offer relevant practical advice. This was not a criticism of the Boot Room strategy per-se, but rather reinforcement that members valued guest speakers.

"it's the practical real life advice that is really useful. We've had lads get jobs or change life focus on the back of advice from speakers... The more we get the better to be honest".

Whilst employment is not the key focus of the Boot Room, it is worth noting that four members are now (September 2016) self-employed, seven are in full time employment and three have found part-time employment. Members asserted that, guest speakers and activities that take place at the Boot Room were contributing factors to these positive outcomes.

Note: At the time when the group discussion was conducted (September 2016) the group had received: four guest speakers from National Careers Service; a Dementia Friends Awareness session; training sessions for Sporting Memories; a meeting with the Heritage Committee; Macmillan Academy IT the way forward; guest speaker from Redcar Regeneration; guest

speaker Self Employment; Health Bus visits; as well as physical activity sessions and volunteering work.

4.4 Marketing

Whilst recruitment figures are demonstrative of the success of engagement with the desired population (e.g. from the initial attendance of 13, the project has now engaged 38 men) the members suggested that the project could benefit many more people:

“Yes, one of the biggest problems for groups like this is getting the word out. There are a lot of lads that don’t know about us”.

According to the members, reaching the target population is the most difficult aspect of the marketing task. As one member articulated, ‘once people attend the group they are likely to return’. Another said:

“They’ve all returned. It’s just getting them through the door that’s difficult”.

The majority of members commented that social contacts (word of mouth) was the primary mechanism of learning about the Boot Room and in many cases this was how members had been introduced to the group.

“I saw Brian (project lead) at a jobs’ fair and there was a couple of MFC Foundation people there. I got talking to Clair (MFC Foundation) and Brian (project lead) and they told me about the launch of this group down at the Riverside with George Friend (Middlesbrough FC football player), so I was intrigued to find out who might be there. I’ve been coming ever since”.

From the perspective of the group, word of mouth was the most effective means of encouraging new members. They had tried disseminating leaflets and flyers at relevant institutions (e.g. Job Centres) without much success; and despite all of the benefits associated with being part of this project, members understood that encouraging more people to attend the group was a difficult task:

“When we first set away at the riverside we had seven people turn up. There were posters in every bog (toilet) at the stadium, so that everyone that was going for a piss was actually reading about it”.

Members thought that one major barrier that stood in the way of recruiting more members to the Boot Room was ‘male pride’. The members explained that needing help and accepting help are very different factors that we should understand when targeting people that are experiencing mental health issues. The members explained that men must be ready to accept help and this means that they must perceive groups (like the Boot Room) as a proactive step forward rather than a signification of weakness.

“To give you an example, I was at a jobs fair and I was chatting to two lads, and I know that they should be here (attending the pilot group). They are finding things tough, it’s obvious. They should turn up, but despite my best efforts they won’t come because they won’t admit. I’m like - trying to explain that, I’m not saying that something is psychologically wrong with you’s but what I’m saying is that come and meet other people that are going through similar things. It helps. But of course, men are not known for this. So there should be more people here, it could benefit many more people, but men are stubborn and won’t admit that they are suffering”.

Members were adamant that the key to recruiting new members was to focus on social interaction and disseminating personal stories by other means. Some of the members have been proactive in engaging with local media in this regard - in the form of radio and television appearances including BBC 1 *Inside Out* special edition on the subject of Middlesbrough Football Clubs promotion and its effect on the region of Teesside (September 9th 2016). One participant explained:

“The more we get the message out in the media or to wherever guys like us take notice, the better. Football is a good starting point”.

The members were willing to share their stories in a media campaign or by creating You Tube streams for the public to access. Other ideas for recruitment included targeting events and organised gatherings to mark the one-year anniversary of SSI closure. There are also opportunities for media engagement relating to this landmark.

“I think we have an opportunity with the up and coming anniversary. There’s a do on in Town that I’m going to and I intend to get the message out. Some lads won’t want to know. They’ve got jobs and for them the steel works is in the past, but there will be many that will be for something like this, but don’t know about it. These reunions are the perfect opportunity to tell people what we are about”.

“We’re coming the anniversary of the close of the steel works, and radio tees are doing a special programme including the lads here – taking peoples stories. So its things like this”.

In addition, the members highlighted social media as a potential avenue for marketing the group to new members. Facebook was used intermittently by most members of the group, and therefore could be targeted in a strategic manner. The group have a Facebook page and are aware of its potential impact for recruitment.

“We take a few snaps of things we’ve been doing on the day and post them, because we know that there are some guys out there that know the lads and keep an eye on what we’ve been doing. You never know it could trigger them to get in touch”.

For example, the picture below (figure 3) was posted on social media. The photograph relates to Boot Room members joining in a fun-day with other groups at Middlesbrough Football Club. Not only was this an opportunity for the members to play football at the Middlesbrough Football Club ground, but to meet other groups of people that were unemployed under different circumstances and to have fun.

Figure 3: Boot Room members joining other groups of men at MFC.



4.5 The Future

Members made a number of observations and suggestions that they thought should be taken into consideration when planning additional engagement activity and Boot Rooms in future.

The Common Language of Football

Members recognised that mental health was a difficult subject to approach for all men. For this reason, they advocated the continued use of football to attract the target audience to the project. As one member explained:

“For men in their 40s, 50s, 60s the football connection is crucial, I think. It was the Boro connection that caught my eye, so that’s why I thought it was worth checking out”.

Another member added:

“If you’re a man in the North East, it’s likely that you’re a football fan”.

Making a crucial point, another member said:

“men are comfortable talking about football and that’s important for groups like ours when strangers take the step of coming down. A quick chat about football gets everyone acquainted doesn’t it? Gets the banter flowing”.

The members could see the multi-faceted relevance of football to the group. It was viewed as a discussion topic, a position of general interest, an enjoyable way to build group bonds, and a comfort blanket that could be used when recruiting new members.

Self-Sustainable

Members sought to highlight the success of the co-ordinator or project lead role. The members explained that the current leader was exemplary because he was – in the words of the members: ‘approachable, fun, empathetic, trustworthy, dependable, helpful but not at all dictatorial’. Moreover, in appraising the individual, the members explained that the current leader fulfils the role of mentor. Recognising this point, the members were asked the following question: *“Do you think that you could replicate Brian’s (project lead) role?”*

One member responded:

“Yes, I think we could because all of us are involved in the running of the place in a sense and we understand the Boot Room philosophy and we’re all involved. We all get involved in volunteering and that; jobs fairs and other stuff. So, in that sense – yeah”.

The thoughts of this member (with much agreement from the group) make the case that there are potentially deeper parallels with the infamous Liverpool Football Club (LFC) Boot Room, from which the current project takes its name. As well as providing a safe space for full and frank discussion, the LFC Boot Room was a place of mentoring and learning that ensured that leaders would pass on skills of leadership to the internal links from within the football club - thus upholding the ‘Liverpool way’. In a similar manner, the members at the Redcar Boot Room have highlighted the potential for a self-sustainable project – including a legacy to recruit the next generation of champions of mental health from within the system. When referring to this point, one member said:

“this is perhaps something that the group could work on more formally in the future”.

Given that the members are experienced, it seems reasonable to suggest that they are suitable to take on official training as champions of mental health and to become future leaders or co-ordinators of additional boot rooms across the region:

"I think I speak for most of us when I say we'd definitely be interested in supporting any future projects that might happen".

Figure 4: Preparing for volunteering and talking to members of the public at Gala day



Target Populations of Future Boot Rooms

The members offered advice on strategies for convening future Boot Room groups. They felt that the groups should focus on a particular demographic (though not necessarily a fixed demographic) that should meet the specific needs of a geographical location:

"In our case it has been SSI and consequences of de-industrialisation but that's not going to resonate all over the North East. So you'll have to think carefully".

Another member added:

"In each area the theme will suggest itself, but then it's about shaping the project to the needs of the group".

In response to this, one member stated:

"Both the lads are spot on. But you do have to be careful not to open it to everyone. I mean it is important that it doesn't become a doss house. It wouldn't work if the job centre sent over kids that weren't really bothered about getting a job if you know what I mean. So you'd have to be very careful about how it was rolled out".

In all instances cited above, the members argued for the target population of future Boot Rooms to share common values and experiences. In their view, coherent characteristics shared by the members at Redcar have significantly contributed to its success.

Empowerment of the men

Whilst the members recognised that future Boot Room franchises should focus on disparate populations (specific to the needs of local people) they also emphasised the importance of the standardisation of one characteristic in the running of such programmes – empowerment.

“If you’re rolling this out across the region you are going to be dealing with totally different people to us, so you have to be flexible. If you’re focused on empowering them, giving them ownership of ideas and such then it will be a success”.

In the current set of circumstances, the members reported that redundancy made them aware of being institutionalised and could not see themselves in any other roles. Members suggested that after engagement with the Boot Room they had regained a degree of perspective and a confidence boost, which was stimulated by gentle coercion (where appropriate), but driven by the members. In retrospect, the members found this to be a valuable strategy:

“You feel like your life has spiralled out of control but coming here gives you perspective again. We’re not told what to think but we are consulted. Your view is valued here”.

The members explained that giving control back to people who feel that they have lost control in other aspects of their lives is an empowering force that can help to stabilise the individual as they start to rebuild their self-esteem and reclaim or build identity. They emphasised the importance of carrying this strategy forward to future programmes.

5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of Findings

This evaluation identified the thoughts, actions and desires of those directly implicated in the Boot Room project via the medium of an interactive group discussion within a Boot Room meeting attended by 12 men. Questions were put to the men that covered the benefits, improvements, further development and evaluation of 'boot rooms' as a community-based intervention to improve mental health resilience. The respondent validation exercise was well-received by members and no changes were made to the findings in the draft report. Consequently, the themes identified are a trustworthy account of the members' views and experiences of the Boot Room.

Football was an important catalyst to involvement in the Boot Room, although this was not the case for all members. A shared social identity and adverse circumstances, combined with the common language of football, were the most powerful facilitators of sustained continued engagement with the boot room.

Hallmarks of success of the Boot Room initiative were supporting member autonomy, with group activities responsive to the needs and interests of members. This member-driven approach served to galvanise empowerment of the men, and critical to this was facilitation by an expert and experienced group lead who exemplified the role of a community champion. This approach to ways of working had a wide range of benefits; specifically involvement in the Boot Room reduced feelings of social isolation, hopelessness and physical inactivity, and also impacted positively on the members' self-esteem, self-confidence and social interaction – all of which fostered positive mental well-being in terms of enhanced feelings of hope and purpose. The latter was augmented by the availability of peer support and guidance, as a medium of spreading knowledge and experience within the group.

Mental health was not an explicit focus of the activities within the group, although it was evident that the Boot Rooms were valuable for mental health (due to the benefits described by members), and acutely recognised the value of 'taking strength from one another' and 'all the guys 'get' one another'. This enabled men to provide empathy to one another based on shared experience, which helped the members to accept advice from, and provide support to one another. This invariably will have helped to reduce stigma and promote help-seeking from individuals with regard to their emotional and mental health needs.

Wider benefits cited by group members were opportunities to develop life skills that were important for helping the men to manage the transition from redundancy to employment. Worthy of note is that inviting speakers from external agencies to attend Boot Room meetings was an effective medium for these agencies (e.g. health, career services, financial services) to positively engage with the men. These 'guests' provided the men with a unique opportunity for the members to meet experts on their 'home turf' and on their own terms. Several men stated

that this informal feature of the boot room was instrumental to them securing employment, volunteering in the community and pursuing training courses.

Additional benefits for the members' friends and family were emphasised by Boot Room members in terms of helping them to cope more positively with the often very stark changes to their home lives, for example, reducing the potential negative impact on the family in terms of changes to the routine of their daily lives.

These benefits are reflective of critical factors associated with improved mental health resilience. A focus on practical and pro-active approach to supporting individual and multiple members' agendas to help them to manage their adverse circumstances, combined with informality and enjoyment provide compelling evidence that the Boot Room initiative is a feasible primary/secondary community-based prevention strategy for mental and physical health.

5.2 Implications of finding for convening of future Boot Rooms

Evidence from the interactive workshop strongly suggested engagement in Boot Rooms is likely to be maximal when there is a focus on social identity and any other shared characteristics of the target population. Development work should involve local voluntary and community groups, Foundations affiliated with local Football Clubs and representatives from statutory health, social care and employment agencies in establishing the local community needs and mechanisms for the provision of actual and 'in-kind' financial support.

In terms of recruitment and marketing, it was clear from the discussions with the Redcar and Cleveland Boot Room members that a social contact model would be optimally effective for disseminating the existence and concept of Boot Rooms, including the use of football as a common language. Therefore, at inception the initial members and group lead should be supported to become 'highly visible' within their community at engagement events, job fairs and social functions/charitable fund raising events targeting the support and alleviation of local issues experienced by communities.

It is critically important that Boot Room activities should be member-focused and groups facilitated by an experienced community champion, with a view on supporting the development of peer-support and mentors within the membership. The latter would help to sustain the group over time, and serve as a legacy to recruit the next generation of champions from within the remit and philosophy of the Boot Room.

The use of social marketing should focus on wider benefits (reduced social isolation, hopelessness and physical inactivity, empowerment and improved self-esteem, self-confidence and social interaction, including skills development) and as such need not necessarily focus exclusively on mental health. Indeed, feedback from the members suggested that badging the boot rooms as a mental health initiative would be counter-productive.

Dissemination of personal stories of the group lead and men who attended the Redcar and Cleveland Boot Room could serve as exemplars for informing social marking in terms of TV, radio and social media. Indeed, many of the men who attended the group discussion had already undertaken such activity, and expressed a strong willingness to share their stories more widely.

5.3 Implications for design of Team Talk mass media campaign

An information campaign to raise awareness and recognition of distress, reduce mental health stigma, and to promote behavioural change in seeking help is currently in development. This will aim to deliver messages about positive mental health seeking behaviour to a population wide audience using the region-wide fan base of Middlesbrough, Sunderland and Newcastle football clubs.

A co-ordinated region wide approach informed by the findings of this report, for example consisting of an overarching mass media campaign (a systematic review of 20 evaluations of mass media interventions for a range of conditions reported a positive effect on health services utilisation^{xvii}) would benefit from the following:

- Utilise appropriate theory to underpin the design of the campaign. In particular Social Cognitive Theory^{xviii} could be used to design content of the campaign that promotes increased attention to the key messages (by using images or short-films showing football fans from local areas will increase the perception that they are similar to members of the target community, and as such will pay greater attention to the campaign), observational learning (actors demonstrating desired attitudes and behaviour within images and film), and confidence (self-efficacy) for expressing attitudes and behaviours without negative consequences.
- Adopting a theory-based approach would also inform the design of an appropriate and robust evaluation strategy. This could take the form of community-based interviews, numbers of hits on a website or interrupted time series evaluations using aggregate level routinely available regional data (e.g. number of people attending IAPT services before and after a specified period following the campaign).
- Campaign messages should focus on the language of football and local dialects as well as characteristics reflective of the collective social identity of the target community, which are co-produced with local stakeholders and piloted to refine their content prior to the campaign going live
- The campaign should seek to address strategies for over-coming barriers to performing desired behaviours (e.g. seeking help for mental health symptoms) and address response efficacy (e.g. explicitly referring to the normalisation of mental health symptoms, strategies to improve wellness and the availability of services such as IAPT).

- Boot room members who have expressed an interest in sharing their personal stories are a critically important source of expert knowledge and experience. They could be appropriately incentivised (e.g. payment of travel expenses) to appear on local TV, radio and in print media as co-developers and campaign ambassadors

5.4 Conclusions

The Redcar and Cleveland Boot Room has been very successful in engaging and supporting a group of adult males affected by the closure of the SSI steelworks and subsequent mass redundancies. As of 25th August 2016, the Boot Room has convened 24 meetings, with 30 men attending on a regular basis.

This evaluation has identified a range of benefits to members of the Redcar and Cleveland Boot Room in terms of building mental health resilience, including wider physical health and psychosocial benefits. Empowerment, member-led activities, shared identity, the language of football and both peer-support and mentoring (supported by an effective community champion) are core to the success of the Boot Room project.

There is also substantial evidence of meaningful wider impact of the Boot Rooms in terms of numbers of men who have secured full-time/self-employment (N=13), engaged in voluntary work, vocational and educational training, including registration as dementia friends (<https://www.dementiafriends.org.uk/>).

Some of the men from the Redcar and Cleveland Boot Room have been proactive in engaging with local media in the form of radio and television appearances, including BBC 1 *Inside Out* special edition on the subject of Middlesbrough Football Clubs promotion and its effect on the region of Teesside (September 9th 2016). They have also set up their own Facebook page to share events, news and as a general medium to communicate with members.

The membership and activities of the Boot Room continues to develop. There is a pressing need to develop a strategic plan in partnership with local stakeholders to ensure funding is in place to sustain the benefits and impact of the Boot Rooms over time, including the undertaking of a comprehensive evaluation to inform implementation of Boot Rooms at the national level.

Appendix 1: Literature Search strategy

Databases: Ovid MEDLINE(R) In-Process & Other Non-Indexed Citations, Ovid MEDLINE(R) Daily, Ovid MEDLINE(R) and Ovid OLDMEDLINE(R) <1946 to Present>

Search Strategy:

- 1 exp Health Promotion/
- 2 exp Mass Media/
- 3 1 or 2
- 4 exp Sport/
- 5 exp Football/
- 6 exp Soccer/
- 7 4 or 5 or 6
- 8 Male/
- 9 exp Men/
- 10 exp Men's Health/
- 11 8 or 9 or 10
- 12 exp Middle Aged/
- 13 3 and 7 and 11 and 12
- 13 limit 12 to (english language and yr="2005 -Current")

Appendix 2 – Interactive Discussion Guide

Football Boot Rooms

Have you always followed / played football? Please explain by drawing on your personal history with the game as well as contemporary experiences.

What was it that attracted you towards the 'boot rooms' project and how did you become involved initially?

Please explain what happens at boot rooms (what you do) and why you think that football is useful to provide the focus for this group?

What has worked well / not so well?

Drawing on your experience of attending and engaging in boot rooms, what do you think (a) has worked well and (b) not so well?

Do you have any suggestions about how boot rooms could be improved to meet the needs of the group?

Marketing

Do you have any suggestions about how boot rooms could be marketed to ensure maximum participation in the future? Please give as much detail as possible.

Evaluation

Do you think it is important for boot room members to draw on their experiences in order to help evaluate this project?

Please share any suggestions you have about how we could measure the worth of this project.

The Future

Do you think that boot rooms have a future role to play for groups of men in the North East?

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